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ABSTRACT

Scholars and practitioners in the field of international and comparative education often need information about recent educational events related to the topics they are currently investigating. In pursuing their research, those who are relatively new to the task may wonder which sources will most readily provide data, analyses, or interpretations they seek. This paper offers suggestions about ways to identify such sources and about advantages and disadvantages of the various options. The discussion is divided into two parts. Part 1, entitled "Studying Distant Sites," describes 11 sources available to investigators. These include scholarly journals, theses and dissertations, government agencies, and international and foreign agencies. Part 2, entitled "Studying Immediate Sites," describes sources available to investigators who can spend time in the country or district they are studying. (RR)

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Sources of Recent Educational Information

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Sources of Recent Educational Information

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Scholars and practitioners in the field of international and comparative education often need information about recent educational events related to the topics they are currently investigating. In pursuing their research, those who are relatively new to the task may wonder which sources will most readily provide the data, analyses, or interpretations they seek. This paper offers suggestions about ways to identify such sources and about advantages and disadvantages of the various options.

The discussion is divided into two parts. Part I, entitled *Studying Distant Sites,* addresses the problem of obtaining information about a country which the researcher cannot visit personally. Part II, labeled *Studying Immediate Sites,* describes sources available to investigators who can spend time in the country or district they are studying. Throughout the discussion, the term *recent* means events occurring within the past five years. The phrase *very recent* refers to events within the past 12 months.

Part I: Studying Distant Sites

Sources of information in Part I are described in the following order: (1) newspapers and newsmagazines, (2) scholarly journals, (3) theses and dissertations, (4) government publications, (5) government agencies, (6) institutional publications, (7) reference books, (8) scholarly books and reports, (9) international and foreign-aid agencies, (10) business organizations, and (11) individuals.

Newspapers and Newsmagazines. Such periodicals are among the best sources of very recent information. They are of two main types —ones published outside the country that the researcher is studying and ones published within the country.

Among newspapers published outside the country, two of the most helpful are the weekly *London Times Educational Supplement* and *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Although the *Times* focuses mainly on Britain and the *Chronicle* on the United States, both dedicate two or three pages each week to educational affairs in other nations. Less useful, but of occasional interest, are articles in daily papers that have an international scope and provide an indexing service available in major university libraries. Examples of this type are the *New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor,* and *Washington Post.* Weekly newsmagazines that sometimes report educational events in foreign lands include *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Report.*

Of more value than periodicals published outside a country are the daily and weekly papers originating within the country itself, since they provide far greater amounts of detailed, up-to-date information. Two disadvantages of in-country periodicals is that they are often difficult to obtain outside the place of their origin and they may be printed in a language the foreign scholar cannot read.

Scholarly Journals. For convenience of discussion, scholarly journals can be divided into three general types —(1) ones dedicated to comparative and international education worldwide, (2) ones specializing in educational matters in a particular region, and (3) ones that do not specialize in education but occasionally include articles useful for educational research.

(1) In the comparative-and-international category, the most helpful journals include the *Comparative Education Review* (USA), *International Review of Education* (UNESCO — Hamburg), *Prospects* (UNESCO —Paris); *Comparative Education, International Journal of Educational Development,* and *Compare* (Britain); *Education Comparee* (France); and *Canadian and International Education* (Canada). Some journals of this type focus on a

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particular facet of education. For instance, *Higher Education Policy* publicizes the activities of the International Association of Universities.

(2) Examples of regional journals are the *Australian Journal of Education, Caribbean Journal of Education, Chinese Education* and *Soviet Education* (both consisting of translations in English), *East/West Education, European Education, Indian Educational Review, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research,* and *Singapore Journal of Education.*

(3) Journals not devoted exclusively to educational topics can be helpful in at least two ways. Occasionally they may include an article with an educational focus, and often they contain information about a society's political, economic, demographic, or cultural conditions that is relevant for educational research. The following titles are only a few examples of the dozens of this type: *Africa Today, African Studies Review, Asian Survey, Caribbean Monthly Bulletin, Caribbean Studies, Central Asian Survey, Central European Forum, Eastern European Politics and Societies, Latin America Perspective, Latin America Research Review, Middle East Journal,* and *Pacific Affairs.*

Scholarly journals are often good sources of events and data three-to-five years in the past, but rarely do they contain information about happenings within the past year or two. This is because a year or more usually passes between the time the editor receives an author's manuscript and the article gets into print. Furthermore, most journals are published quarterly, so there is a considerable time lapse between one issue and the next.

Compared to newspaper accounts, journal articles more frequently cast events against their historical and sociopolitical background, contain more detail, and analyze events in terms of a sociological, economic, political, or anthropological theory. In contrast to news items, manuscripts submitted to the leading journals undergo a process of review by knowledgeable scholars who endeavor to ensure that errors of fact and interpretation are corrected before the articles are published.

Theses and Dissertations. Brief synopses of a large proportion of the doctoral dissertations produced in North American universities are published in *Dissertation Abstracts*, a resource available in major university libraries. Although dissertations sometimes furnish relatively recent information, they are not suitable sources of very recent events because of the considerable length of time required for writing a dissertation and entering a synopsis in *Dissertation Abstracts.*

If the synopsis of a work suggests that the dissertation itself would be useful, a copy of the entire work can be purchased from the publishers of the *Abstracts* or, in some cases, borrowed (via interlibrary loan services) from the library of the institution in which the dissertation originated.

Government Publications. Useful publications that may be issued by the nation being studied are:

(a) Annual general-information booklets that focus on demographic patterns, political structure and office holders, educational institutions, economic conditions, divisions of the national budget, the extent of mass-communication media, and tourist information.

(b) The government's current socioeconomic-development plan (typically issued every five years) that includes a report of past educational accomplishments and problems as well as intended activities and expenditures for the upcoming years.

(c) Population census reports.

(d) Annual reports from the Ministry of Education.

(e) Pamphlets describing special educational projects.

There are three principal sources of these materials. One is the government-publications section of a major university library in North America or Europe. That is, leading academic libraries commonly obtain a variety of publications from governments around the world, either at the initiative of those governments or at the request of the libraries.

A second source is the foreign government itself. To obtain material most directly, a researcher can send a request to the agency in the foreign government that issues the

desired publication. This will often be the Ministry of Education. If the researcher does not know which publication might contain the needed data, the type of information desired can be described so that personnel in the agency can decide which report or pamphlet should be sent.

If the investigator does not know the names or addresses of the proper agency in the foreign country, this information can be sought through the cultural attaché in the researcher's own country. For example, in the United States the cultural attachés of foreign governments are typically located at the nation's embassy in Washington, DC. The address of the embassy can be found in the reference section of nearly any university library. Occasionally personnel at the embassy will obtain from their homeland the sort of publication the researcher requests. However, my own experience suggests that writing directly to the agency in the home country is a far more reliable method, particularly in the case of developing nations whose embassy staffs are frequently not prepared to furnish such services.

The third source is some person in the foreign nation who is willing to ferret out the desired information and send it to the researcher. Of the three sources, this is often the most effective. However, it requires that (a) the researcher is acquainted with the name and address of a suitable person and (b) this foreign acquaintance knows where the desired information can be found, has access to the information, and will take the time and bother to obtain material and send it to the investigator. Such acquaintances are typically more willing to assume such a task if they can expect to get something useful out of the arrangement. In other words, they are more apt to cooperate if they feel they are not simply being exploited by the researcher. Thus, it is appropriate for the investigator to offer funds to cover expenses the acquaintance incurs in securing the materials. And especially in the case of developing nations, members of the country's academic community highly appreciate receiving books and journals that are not easily obtained in their own land. Hence, a researcher who sends such books and journals as a gesture of goodwill is able to repay the foreign acquaintance in kind.

Government Agencies. The most recent information about a topic is usually not yet in print. Therefore, to obtain the newest enrollment figures, budget policies, curriculum innovations, employment rules, plans for school expansion, and the like, it is necessary to correspond directly with staff members in the government agency that collects or creates such information. The guidelines suggested above for obtaining government publications are equally useful for identifying and contacting agency personnel who can furnish the needed data.

Institutional Publications. The term *institutional publications* in this context refers to such materials as catalogs, annual reports, publicity brochures, research reports, descriptions of public services, anniversary memorials, commencement programs, and instructors' handbooks issued by a particular university, school, or training center to describe its own activities. The most effective way to obtain such materials is to write directly to the institution and to describe precisely the kind of information desired. Occasionally such a publication (example: a history of the institution issued for the 100th anniversary of its founding) will be available in a larger university library within the researcher's own country.

Reference Books. In this category I place encyclopedias and fact books.

Encyclopedias can be either general (*Americana, Britannica, Colliers, World Book*, and the like) or specialized (*International Encyclopedia of Education* and *International Higher Education: An Encyclopedia*).

The recency of encyclopedia contents obviously depends on the revision date of the available edition and on which articles have been updated for the most recent version. Although leading general encyclopedias issue revised editions every two or three years, they typically update only a portion of the articles, so that the newest edition may not include recent material about the topic of one's research. Some general encyclopedias,

such as the *Britannica,* also issue an annual supplement which contains an article entitled "Education" that notes highlights of educational events around the world for the previous year. However, there is no detailed information about such events. Annual supplements also provide recent demographic, economic, and political information about most countries of the world.

Of the specialized educational encyclopedias, the 10-volume *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Pergamon, 1985) has been the most comprehensive and detailed; but by now its contents are no longer recent. A completely revised edition is scheduled for publication in 1994. Because the two-volume *International Higher Education: An Encyclopedia* (Garland) was published in 1991, its information at present tends to be more up to date.

Fact books are periodic publications offering brief descriptions of cultural, demographic, economic, educational, and/or political conditions for one or more nations or for regions within a nation. The most obvious of this type are the annual world almanacs. Other examples are the two-volume *Europa Yearbook*, issued by Europa Publications in London, and the annual World *Factbook*, a product of the U.S. Government's Central Intelligence Agency. Each *Europa Yearbook* contains detailed information on dozens of international organizations (member nations, form of organization, activities, budgets, publications) and on each nation of the world (recent history, the constitution, government structure, economic affairs, social welfare, education, mass communication, religion, trade, industry, demographics, and important publishers). In like manner, the World *Factbook* identifies the member countries of a variety of international associations (including 17 organizations affiliated with the United Nations). For nearly every nation of the world, the *Factbook* summarizes geographical, demographic, economic, communication, and governmental conditions. It does not, however, include information about education systems.

Scholarly Books and Reports. Each year a variety of books are published about special aspects of international and comparative education. Some focus on a particular country or region, such as Marsh and Morris' *Curriculum Development in East Asia* (Falmer, 1991), Shoppa's *Educational Reform in Japan* (Routledge, 1990), Urch's *Education in Subsaharan Africa* (Garland, 1991), and Feeney's *Early Childhood Education in Asia and the Pacific* (Garland, 1992). Others address a special topic, then provide information about how the topic manifests itself in societies around the world, as in Bray's *Ministries of Education in Small States* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1991), Psacharopoulos' *Essays on Poverty, Equity, and Growth* (Pergamon, 1991), Postlethwaite and Wiley's *The IEA Study of Science II: Science Achievement in 23 Countries* (Pergamon, 1992), and Thomas' *The Role of Education in National Plans* (Praeger, 1992).

If such books are to serve as sources of recent data, it is obviously necessary for a researcher to learn of their existence as soon as possible after their publication. One source of such information is the listing of new books in the *CIES Newsletter* and in the book review section of such journals as the *Comparative Education Review* and the *International Review of Education.* Another source is any major universitiy's library catalog system, which these days is usually accessed by computer rather than by the traditional card file. Such library resources as *Books in Print* may also prove useful.

International and Foreign-Aid Agencies. Among the most helpful materials from international bodies are publications of United Nations organizations. The *Statistical Yearbook* issued by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) offers enrollment data from the first level of schooling through higher education for most countries of the world. UNESCO also distributes reports on a wide variety of projects conducted under its auspices. Information about such materials can be sought either from the organization's headquarters in Paris or from the regional UNESCO office for the area in which the projects have been conducted. Typical of such material is the extended report on "Distance Education in Asia and the Pacific" in the *Bulletin of the Unesco Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok, 1985). Two separate bodies beneath the UNESCO umbrella that publish useful material are the

International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris and the International Bureau of Education (IBE) in Geneva.

The central office of UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) at the United Nations headquarters in New York issues reports on recent developments in early-childhood education. WHO (World Health Organization) in Geneva disseminates information about health and nutrition education, particularly in developing nations. The World Bank in Washington, DC, in relation to its funding major educational-development projects in developing regions, produces several types of publications containing recent information. One type summarizes conditions in a particular domain of education in various parts of the world, then proposes ways to surmount problems faced in this domain. An example is *Vocational Education and Training in Developing Countries: Policies for Flexibility, Efficiency, and Quality* (1989). Another type, which may be more difficult for a researcher to obtain, is the report of specific economic and educational conditions in a nation in which the Bank is proposing to finance an educational-development project.

Other foreign-aid bodies that often can provide recent information are the foreign-service divisions of national governments which sponsor projects or provide services in developing nations. Illustrative of these organizations are the United States Agency for International Development (US-AID), the British Council, Canada's International Development Research Center (IDRC), Germany's Goethe Institute, the German Foundation for International Development (DSIE), the Swedish Institute, and the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA).

Useful publications are also issued by organizations that draw their membership from a collection of countries and that study educational issues within those countries. Examples are the Commonwealth Secretariat (comprised of Britain and dozens of its former colonies), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD —mainly Western European and North American nations), the Council of Europe, the European Community, the World Council of Churches, the Asian Development Bank, and the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Names and addresses of many such bodies are listed in the *Europa Yearbook*.

Business Organizations. Business and industrial interests occasionally distribute recent information useful to scholars. This material is usually in the form of newsletters, magazines, bulletins, and pamphlets. Three motives that appear to stimulate such efforts are those of (1) directly selling the company's product, (2) convincing readers of a political or economic viewpoint favorable to the company's interests, or (3) engendering goodwill by financing the publication of a book or article focusing on some aspect of the host nation's history or culture. A typical publication resulting from this third motive is the recent book by Patience Sonko-Godwin about the history of the ethnic groups of Senegal and the Gambia, printed in the Gambia with funds from the Shell Oil Company.

Such materials can often be obtained through the business organization's public relations department or through public libraries. These publications are typically well written and frequently are one of the better sources of knowledge on the topics they feature. However, the fact that they may surreptitiously advocate a particular political, economic, or social philosophy suggests that researches need be prepared to recognize the bias they may reflect.

Individuals. There are several common ways to locate individuals who might provide recent information about a country's educational conditions. Among the most helpful resources are professional journals, government reports, proceedings of conferences, and doctoral dissertations that focus on the country of interest. These publications typically list the names and institutional affiliations of their authors. A researcher can then write or phone an author for the desired information. Some authors can furnish the material directly, while some may only suggest the names and locations of other people who might provide it.

Additional sources of knowledgeable individuals are professional seminars and meetings, such as the CIES national and regional conferences. The printed program for the conference will show which sessions might be related to an investigator's research topic. By attending the session, the investigator not only can speak with the people presenting papers but may also meet members of the audience who are well versed in recent educational events for the nation of concern.

If the information the researcher seeks is at all complex, difficult to obtain, or politically sensitive, those people who have access to such data may not consider it worth their time and effort —or possibly their reputation— to furnish it. There are several ways this problem can be approached. One way is to impress the potential informant with the important contribution the desired material can make. For instance, noting that the data are needed for an encyclopedia article is more likely to elicit the informant's cooperation than if the data are sought for a masters-degree thesis. Or, stating that the material is for a chapter of a book that is already contracted —a book that includes chapters by well-known authors in the field— will usually serve as a more convincing appeal than if the material is to appear in a proposal for funding an educational project.

Another method of attracting informants' goodwill is to offer them something useful in return for their help. At the very least, this can be a promise to send them a report of the work upon its completion. One way to phrase such an offer can be: "As a small token of my appreciation to those who are helping me collect information, I plan to send each one a copy of the article when it is finished." Or, if the aid that is sought will make a substantial contribution to the research project, the statement might be: "If you are able to furnish that information, I hope you would permit me to acknowledge your help in a footnote to the chapter."

As suggested earlier, educators in developing nations are usually quite eager to receive books and journals in their field of interest. Thus, the researcher may propose: "In order to compensate you in a small way for your effort on my behalf, I would be pleased to send you some recent professional books which you might find useful."

Part II: Studying Immediate Sites

Pursuing research from within the country itself rather than from afar is a task accompanied by both advantages and constraints in terms of (1) breadth and specificity of information and (2) access to resources.

Breadth and Specificity of Information. It is apparent that for most research topics, the range and detail of recent information obtainable within a country far surpasses that available outside. Within the nation, investigators immediately have at hand a variety of newspapers, university catalogs, schools' courses of study, masters and doctoral theses, ministry of education bulletins, and newly published books. Material not yet in print can be sought through visits to schools, government offices, religious organizations, and the homes of informed citizens. The opinions of subgroups of the population can be collected on questionnaires. Students' achievement can be evaluated by means of tests, and the perceptions of educators and political figures can be gathered through interviews.

How successfully a researcher can take advantage of these potentialities is influence by the following access factors.

Access to Resources. Four variables affecting the access an investigator has to information are language skills, political circumstances, friendship networks, and the status hierarchy.

Language Skills. Researchers obviously are in a far better position to utilize resources if they speak and read the language of the area they are studying. A command of the local tongue not only equips one to directly examine printed materials, understand speeches, follow news broadcasts, and conduct interviews. Such skill can also engender greater cooperation on the part of local informants, since it provides them the convenience of

conversing in their own idiom, and it suggests that the investigator cared enough about the local people to learn their language.

Without a knowledge of an area's language, researchers must depend on bilingual translators for collecting information. Sometimes this option will suffice. Other times suitable translators are not available when needed; and even when they are available, they may fail —either intentionally or through lack of skill— to render prompt, accurate translations.

Political Circumstances. Political considerations can influence access to information in several ways —in the likelihood that the researcher will be permitted to enter a country and remain there, in the types of resources that are open, in the kinds of people the researcher meets, in how forthcoming and truthful informants will be, and in the relationship between the investigator's official position and the research topic.

Permission to Enter the Country. Rarely do the leaders in any nation enjoy having their society's shortcomings exposed to international view. Governments of developing nations, in particular, dislike foreigners publicizing conditions that would be regarded abroad as undesirable. This apparent paranoia can result from different motives. One is the government's claim that foreigners in the past have too often disseminated prejudicial, distorted versions of the country's social, economic, and political circumstances. Another is the government's fear that even accurate accounts will reveal widespread ignorance, corruption, intergroup conflict, inefficiency, favoritism, broken promises, and lack of progress in their society, a revelation that may produce a poor national image abroad and possibly stimulate social disorder at home. As a result, many governments are reluctant — or outright unwilling— to allow foreigners access to information that might provide an unfavorable impression of the nation and its leadership. One way to prevent such a possibility is for the government to deny foreign scholars permission to enter the country to conduct research. Furthermore, the government agency responsible for issuing entrance visas to researchers can take months or years even to approve a politically acceptable project. Such a delay means that the data-collection phase of the project is long postponed. What was to be *very recent* information may no longer qualify as such.

Two ways to circumvent the research-visa problem are for the researcher either to enter the country only as a tourist or to enlist a local scholar as a co-investigator. Entering the country on a tourist visa is feasible whenever the needed knowledge can be collected in a short period of time, when only public sources of information are required (newspapers, books, openly circulated government reports), and when the research topic is not so politically sensitive that a potential local informant is likely to report the activity to the authorities. If these three conditions do not obtain, the use of a local co-investigator can be considered.

There are several ways to identify and engage a competent co-investigator. The first is by means of personal friendship. The friendship may have been established when the researcher and the foreign student were classmates in graduate school. Or the researcher may have been a professor in a university in which the foreign student was enrolled. Thus, the foreign student, upon returning home, may be available to engage in a cooperative investigation with the researcher.

A second way is to request a recommendation from some other scholar who has had extensive experience working in the country of interest. A third method is to enter the country on a tourist visa, then visit universities so as to become acquainted with faculty members who would like to pursue the topic under study. Once a tentative agreement is reached with the local counterpart, specific plans can be laid regarding what data are needed, how they are to be collected, how they will be analyzed, in what form the report will be published, and how these different tasks will be divided among the members of the project staff.

Resource Availability. Receiving permission to work in a country obviously does not ensure that the desired resources will be forthcoming, because the visiting researcher still faces problems of (1) learning where the desired information is located, (2) gaining access

to the information, and (3) obtaining permission to publish it. How well these problems are solved will typically depend on how skillfully the investigator establishes friendly relations with key people in the nation's educational and/or political systems. In effect, friendship networks can be crucial to the success of data gathering.

Friendship Networks. The methods mentioned in Part I of this paper for identifying individuals who might furnish information from abroad are suitable as well for locating potential informants within the country being studied.

Prior to visiting a foreign region, it is obviously a great time-saver if the researcher already has in hand names of residents of the country who can give advice about how best to obtain needed information. Furthermore, the ease of gaining the trust and cooperation of a potential informant is enhanced if the investigator carries a letter of introduction from someone the informant already knows and respects. But even without letters of introduction, the researcher can, upon entering the country, begin to plug into friendship networks by visiting universities, offices of the Ministry of Education, other government offices, local schools, and libraries to engage staff members' interest in the project the investigator is pursuing.

The Status Hierarchy. Not all visiting researchers enjoy equal status in the host country. In other words, visiting scholars vary in the extent to which they are respected, trusted, and able to enlist the cooperation of local people. An individual's status is typically enhanced if he or she: (1) holds a position as a staff member or consultant for a international organization or foreign government that is furnishing aid to the host nation, (2) has a notable record of published research, (3) has established close ties with influential political and academic figures in the host country, (4) comes from a prestigious university abroad, and/or (5) convincingly suggests that the current research will be published in a form that will be well regarded and widely distributed abroad.

Among these conditions, that of being a staff member or consultant for a foreign-aid organization is of particular interest, since special advantages and disadvantages accompany such a position. One advantage is that the researcher usually has direct access to a host of very recent information. This occurs when the investigator's official assignment includes creating information (testing students, surveying teachers, producing curricula, and the like) or summarizing data from the education system's files (budgets, development plans, enrollment figures). Furthermore, the scholar's official role often places him or her in a coworker relationship with indigenous educators whose friendship can yield an insider's perception of the education system's operations. However, the fact that the investigator is an employee of a foreign-aid agency often serves to restrict the way information can later be used. Typically, the employment contract that a scholar signs with an agency will stipulate that no publication of data gathered during the period of employment may be issued without the permission of the aid organization or, in some cases, of the host government. Such a provision can prevent researchers from publishing material crucial to the topic they are studying. And even when permission is eventually given, the process of obtaining it may have taken so long that the information is now no longer recent.

Conclusion

The foregoing overview of ways to obtain recent information about educational matters has identified a variety of data sources and conditions of their use, but obviously it has not been definitive. For example, the amount of money available to the researcher is clearly a significant variable. Ample funds enable a scholar to hire assistants whose help can greatly hasten data-collection and analysis so that information is still recent at the time the study is published. Adequate funding also equips a researcher to travel to sites where the most recent information is found.

Thus, in addition to the items described in the body of this paper, there are also other factors that influence how up-to-date an author's work will be when it appears in print.